

WSST - TV

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March 27, 1996

Secretary
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
1919 M Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

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MAR 29 1996

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY


RE: Reply Comments Docket No. 95-176--Closed Captioning
and Video Description

Dear Mr. Secretary:

SUNBELT SOUTH TELE-COMMUNICATIONS, LTD. (Licensee of
WSST-TV, Cordele, Georgia) attaches herewith for filing its
Reply Comments in the matter of Closed Captioning and Video
Description. Enclosed is the original and nine copies. We
request that a personal copy be delivered to the CHAIRMAN and
to each Commissioner.

Respectfully submitted,

SUNBELT SOUTH TELE-COMMUNICATIONS, LTD.


William B. Goodson
General Partner

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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

MM Docket No. 95-176

SUNBELT SOUTH TELE-COMMUNICATIONS LTD.

Sunbelt South Tele-Communications, Ltd. (Licensee of WSST-TV,

We believe that the matter of prohibitive and hurtful

BACKGROUND OF RESPONDENT

Sunbelt South Tele-Communications, Ltd. (hereafter "SSTC")

In actual fact, we are much smaller than the market size indicates, because we are not located in Albany, but in Cordele. Cordele is 40 miles North of Albany. Most importantly, and in contrast to the other stations in the market, WSST-TV does not place a city-grade or Grade "A" signal over any of Albany and covers only about 25% of the city of Albany with a Grade "B" contour. Our station covers well under 50% of the Albany ADI, causing us to be primarily dependent on the immediate service area for the larger portion of our income. Our city, Cordele, has a population of approximately 12,000 and Crisp County has a population of slightly over 22,000. This constitutes the bulk of our market. Given these limitations, WSST-TV cannot sustain a minimum 400% increase in its operating costs (discussed later in these comments) and have any hope of remaining in business.

We are able to address the matter at question from two different standpoints--from the standpoint of a probable provider and from the standpoint of a probable user. William B. Goodson, author of this document, is a general partner in SSTC, and he is also a probable user of video description in that he is visually handicapped to the extent that he is unable to see the video picture being displayed on the screen. It is, therefore, from the standpoint of burdensome or prohibitive expense and from the standpoint of personal need that these reply comments are submitted. WSST-TV lacks the financial ability to bear the cost of research as to the other subjects addressed in comments on this matter.

HURTFUL FINANCIAL BURDEN

Although our station serves a very small market and has a comparable income, the viewer would never recognize those facts from the quality of our programming service. While some may see it as a little old-fashioned in this day-and-time, the author of this paper has been involved in broadcasting since 1953, a period of forty-three years and during all that time has taken very seriously the FCC's expectation of community service and diversification. At the time of this writing, WSST-TV programs six (6) hours of local live service every day Monday-through-Friday. This includes everything from a live morning and noon show to local news service. On Saturday, the station produces the area's only two-hour local live music program (live, not videos). On Sunday, WSST-TV carries three hours of local minority programming and special minority news--90 minutes of which is local live and an additional 90 minutes which is local tape and there is an additional 60 minutes of live remote telecasting on Sunday. In addition to this large amount of local live programming on a weekly basis, SSTC also produces, annually, several hundred telecasts from community events such as the Watermelon Festival, and from numerous other festivals, school events, community events, community service (such as several days of on-the-spot coverage of the Great Flood of 1994), and full coverage of important community meetings such as the Cordele City Commission Meeting. We do all of this with only fourteen fulltime and two part-time employees.

While the writer lacks data on exact percentages of live and local programming carried by much larger television stations in the nation, we believe from observing the signals of other area stations that there is no question that the amount of local and live programming carried by WSST-TV far exceeds the service of much larger stations in the area.

Clearly, the apparent large percentage of live local programming carried by WSST-TV would subject it to a much greater burden of expense than larger stations, should mandatory Closed Captioning and/or Video Description be applied equally to all providers without regards to the financial ability and market size of the provider.

Therefore, by having provided more extensive local or live programming as a service to its community, WSST-TV and other similar stations would incur much larger Closed Captioning or Video Description expenses than would much richer network stations which get most of their Closed Captioning service either from their network or from franchise services. Small stations in small markets would likely be financially destroyed by providing the very community service which the FCC has urged for decades. In the alternative, expenses alone would force these stations to discontinue community service programs, specialty programs, and local news, in favor of franchised programs, many of which already have Closed Captioning provided within the tape or satellite transmission. We believe that such a forced alternative would result in the loss of local community programming in most communities in market sizes less

than the top 100. So that the reader can get a better idea of how burdensome Closed Captioning or Video Description could be, we submit the following financial picture: WSST-TV has an approximate daily income of \$2,000 per day and an approximate operating cost of \$1,650 per day. The station is making a small profit at this time. Referring to the FCC's Notice Of Inquiry (December 1, 1995) (MM Docket No. 95-176), the Commission makes reference to the legislative history of the TDCA, in 1990, and states that Closed Captioning costs roughly \$2,500 per hour and 20-30 man hours per captioned hour. According to the same document, references made to more recent testimony which indicates the cost of Video Description could run from \$2,000 to \$5,000 per hour.

WSST-TV believes that time and technology may reduce the above-referenced costs somewhat. However, if the expected costs were reduced by a quantum leap (say by 50%), the cost per hour of finished video would remain around \$1,250 to \$2,500 per finished hour. Applying these figures to this small-market television station, there would be an increased cost (using the lower estimate) of \$1,250 times 6 hours per day for just local and live programs. We would, thus, incur a minimum daily operating increase of \$7,500 per day plus the current present operating cost of \$1,650 per day. Simple mathematics discloses that the addition of just six hours of Closed Captioning at half the present estimate would result in more than a 400% increase in operating cost. This is without even considering that our present hard working staff could not manage to accomplish this, so that our payroll also would expand beyond that which we could manage.

In using these figures, we have made no estimate of Closed Captioning or Video Description for the remaining eighteen hours per day, nor have we made any estimate for the many special community programs and minority services provided by this station. It can clearly be seen that adding a minimum of \$7,500 per day for Closed Captioning to the present operating expense creates a minimum daily operating expense of \$9,150 to be serviced from an approximate daily income of \$2,000. This produces a daily short-fall of \$7,150. In a period of thirty days, Closed Captioning would see this station at least \$200,000 in debt and no chance of ever showing a profit.

Those are the cold, hard facts faced by this small-market television station if Closed Captioning or Video Description is mandated without special provisions for situations like ours. In short, we would be out of business and deeply in debt within one month.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While we admittedly do not have the financial resources to research the facts as to the number of hearing-impaired individuals within our service area, reasonable research and observation appears to indicate that the number of hearing impaired is so small that the gains to be obtained from mandatory Closed Captioning do not justify closing down this popular community service provider. As to Video Description, the writer of these reply comments is himself functionally blind (vision less than 20/400) and might personally benefit from Video Description. However, it is the writer's personal

conclusion that nearly all television programs may be readily digested by blind or nearly blind persons without any substantial degradation in the value of the program content to the affective person. The writer observes real loss only in some movies and in the Weather Channel where local weather is only printed on the screen and not spoken.

As the writer's blindness progressed, he was not consciously aware of the point at which he stopped looking at the TV screen, nor was he aware of any substantial loss of television service. Such loss as he did observe would likely not be filled by video description (he watches few movies now, nor did he watch them before the onset of blindness).

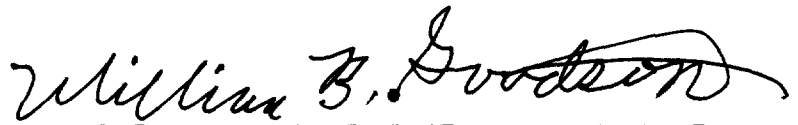
In conclusion, if mandatory Closed Captioning or Video Description is adopted, the FCC should develop a plan which would not destroy any television provider which is now providing a reasonable service, nor should heavy financial burdens be placed on small market television stations which lack the resources to comply. It is probable that small market stations are much more likely to produce large percentages of local live programming than are network stations in larger markets. The FCC should not permit this tendency toward local programming to cause an inordinate burden on the provider.

In its Notice Of Inquiry, the FCC has indicated that it might grant waivers or exceptions on petition from small market stations. We believe that case-by-case waivers would create a huge paper work burden on the FCC as well as on the provider. Instead of a waiver system, we suggest that the FCC adopt rules exempting all providers below a certain income level or in markets smaller than the top 100. We would further

suggest that the FCC grant waivers in general program areas for stations located within the top 50 and top 100 Markets.

This station is currently successfully carrying numerous programs which are Closed Captioned as provided by the program supplier. This includes talk shows, some news programs and some children's programming. We note that Closed Captioning within franchised programming has substantially increased in the last three years. We believe that the FCC policy will place far less burden on national program providers than on local providers and that the FCC should consider directing its policy along those lines. After all, the addition of \$2,000 or less per hour on network program production costs would mean very little to the producer, but we believe that the very same costs would destroy local television service in small markets, or would result in local stations dropping local program services. We believe that anything which results in the loss of local service will be a disservice and not a service to viewers. We, therefore urge the FCC to adopt wide exemptions to local stations in small markets, and less-inclusive exceptions to stations in much larger markets. These exceptions should be made as a function of the rules and not on a one-by-one waiver basis so as not to create a paper monster for the FCC as well as for providers.

Submitted this 27th day of March 1996.


SUNBELT SOUTH TELE-COMMUNICATIONS, LTD.
William B. Goodson, General Partner

SUNBELT SOUTH TELE-COMMUNICATIONS, LTD.
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